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# Depictions (Visions) of the Afterlife: A Reflection of Societal (Social) Values

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# Depictions (Visions) of the Afterlife: A Reflection of Societal (Social) Values

## **Abstract**

The concept of an afterlife has profoundly changed throughout western civilization and reflects the outlook of those living at the time. The concept of an afterlife serves many purposes and motivations. For Plato in Hellenistic Greece, an afterlife completes his argument on the nature of justice; an afterlife provides motivation for individuals to be just, with the promise of a reward or punishment. Similarly, the Roman writers Cicero and Virgil use the rewards and punishments in the afterlife as motivation for justice with more weight on the Roman values of patriotism and public service. Greco-Roman values become Christianized as Dante borrows from Aristotelean ethics to systematically classify sin. To classify sin is to understand and thus overcome sin.

The changing view of the afterlife in the Hellenistic world reflects a profound change in the outlook of those living at that time. An early indication of that change can be found in literature of classical Greece—notably in Plato's Republic. In the Republic, Plato focuses on the nature of justice—the just man and the just state. But Plato completes his inquiry with an allegory—the Myth of Er—to argue that justice has its rewards in the afterlife. Plato's belief in the immortality of the soul challenged the traditional understanding of death and the afterlife (341-46). In the Myth of Er, the spirit of the deceased, doesn't just reside with all others in a dreary “house of the dead”. Prince Er, who died and returned to life, reported that souls face a judgment in the afterlife. A soul will be judged on whether it has lived a just or unjust life on earth. The outcome of the judgment will decide where the soul will spend the next 1000 years. The just souls will ascend to heaven, which is like a beautiful meadow. The unjust souls will descend beneath the earth to suffer tenfold all the wrongs they had done in their lifetime. Those souls that have sinned too greatly will never return, and they will forever suffer beneath the earth (351-53).

Plato's idea of the immortality of the soul suggests there are a finite number of souls. This raises the question as to how bodies are continually being replenished with new souls. Plato's response is reincarnation; after a soul has spent its 1000 years in heaven/beneath the earth, the soul journeys to the center of the Spindle of Necessity, and the soul then chooses its next life. The soul passes beneath the throne of Necessity and into the plain of Forgetfulness. The soul is then required to drink from the river of Unmindfulness, which causes the soul to forget everything. Once the soul falls asleep, it will later wake in birth, within its new body (354-59).

Roman writers, well-acquainted with the legacy of Greek philosophy, articulated a similar view of the afterlife, but infused it with distinctly Roman values, especially the importance of patriotism and public service. Cicero, in his “Dream of Scipio” tells of Scipio's vision of the afterlife. In Scipio's dream, his deceased grandfather Africanus, leads him through the afterlife (341-55). Within this the

Cosmos, there are nine spheres. Heaven is the outermost layer, and the earth is the innermost layer. The earth is silent and motionless; it is according to Africanus insignificant. The only thing that matters is the outer sphere of heaven. All human achievements are not equal in merit; however, those who are virtuous and dedicate themselves to their country are “reserved a special place in heaven” (344).

Scipio inquires about his father and others and whether they are dead. Africanus says “that they have escaped from the prison-house of their bodies” and that the life as Scipio calls it is actually death. Africanus declares to Scipio, “Understand that you are god.” The soul rules the body just as god directs the universe (344-45). Unlike the body, which is moved by the soul, the soul moves itself. In Aristotelean physics, the “Prime Mover” is that which moves without being moved. In addition Aristotle’s ideas on causation note that each final cause or motion can be traced back to a first cause or motion, so the cause or motion that cannot be caused or moved by another is the “unmoved mover” (145-52). In the same respect, Cicero argues that since the soul is self-moved, it must not have a beginning or end, so the soul must be eternal (Cicero 353-54). Those souls that are not slaves to their bodies and do not indulge in bodily passions, will find it easier to get into heaven. Whereas those souls that are slaves to their bodies and indulge may not reach heaven until they are purged— a process that entails years of torment (354-55).

Virgil, in book six of the Aeneid, vividly describes the afterlife and infuses his description with Roman values. Prince Aeneas is guided through the underworld by Sibyl (950). Aeneas passes across the River Styx, drugs the three-headed dog, Cerebus, and then at the first threshold, he encounters the souls who have taken their own lives or the infants who died prior to living a life worth judging. Nearby are the Fields of Mourning; here reside souls who are also unable to cross to the other side. These souls, such as Aeneas’ once lover Dido, ended their own lives, so they must forever remain in the same pain they had prior to death. Further down the path the path splits: One road leads right to Dis, the highway to Elysium, and the one on the left to Tartarus, the place in which “the wicked are

punished” (950-54).

In Tartarus, the Titans as well as others reside and are punished by various means of torment (955). Aeneas is warned here by Phlegyas to “Be warned, learn justice, do not scorn the gods!” (957). After Aeneas accomplishes his task, he then travels to the “land of gladness, glades of gentleness, the Groves of Blessedness.” Here many musicians and poets reside, as well as those “who suffered wounds, fighting for their homeland” (958).

In the Groves of Blessedness, Aeneas meets his father, Anchises, and Anchises reveals the “mysteries” to Aeneas. In this passage Virgil borrows from neo-platonic and Stoic philosophy. Anchises informs Aeneas of the soul— a seed of fiery energy. “The source is a heavenly; but souls are dulled by harmful bodies...They are dungeoned in their darkness and blind prison” (960). Once souls leave their bodies, they are punished with “torments for their old misdeeds,” and then the souls are purified. Afterwards the souls go to Elysium and a few make it to the Fields of Gladness. Virgil echoes Plato’s Myth of Er when he describes the process of reincarnation. In his description, the souls are summoned to return to the upper world after a 1000 years. Some souls may “again begin to wish for bodies.” These souls will drink from the River Lethe, and they forget their past. Anchises also reveals Aeneas’ destiny. Aeneas learns his descendent will be a great ruler of a great empire— Augustus Caesar (961-62).

Virgil’s primary purpose in writing the Aeneid was to validate the rule of Caesar Augustus, but in doing so, Virgil introduced new religious ideas that were gaining popularity in first-century Rome. The “mysteries” refers to a new theological orientation to the afterlife; and new “mystery religions” promised their followers a successful passage from the “Here and Now” to the “Eternal and Beyond.” Christianity, as a new religion of the late Hellenistic world, shares with these mystery religions this abiding concern for what awaits in the afterlife.

In The Divine Comedy, Dante presents a synthesis of the Christian and Greco-Roman

conceptions of the afterlife. Heavily influenced by Aristotelean philosophy, Dante uses a rational, empirical methodology to gain an understanding of sin. His journey to Hell is a “field study”—an inquiry into the nature of sin. He will, in good Aristotelean fashion, discover the “final cause” (results) of sin and classify sin—thereby creating a hierarchical order with each sin in its “proper place”. Knowledge empowers. With an understanding of sin, Dante can overcome the three beasts blocking his way to the Mount of Joy. As the poem’s protagonist, Dante needs of an expert to guide him through Hell. Virgil, summoned by Beatrice, offers to accompany Dante on his journey (7). For Dante, the poet, the choice of Virgil is no surprise. Dante felt a close affinity with the ancient Roman poet, and in his description of the Christian Hell, he relied heavily on Virgil’s description of Hades in Book Six of the Aeneid.

Dante’s Hell consists of nine circles; each circle within is categorized by the sin committed by the souls that reside there, and the torments afflicted upon the souls symbolize the sins committed in their life. Dante organizes Hell according to three general categories of “unethical” behavior established by Aristotle: incontinence; violence; and malice. Upper Hell is designated for the sins of the she-wolf—incontinence. Lower Hell is divided into two categories; the sins of the lion-violence and bestiality, and the sins of the leopard--fraud and malice (107-108).

The first circle of Dante’s Hell is much like Virgil’s first threshold; Limbo is where the virtuous pagans resided (25). These pagans did not have an opportunity to accept Christ. Dante does not believe they deserve punishment. For these souls the only pain is that they have no hope of ascending to Paradise. Dante populates Limbo with the poets and philosophers of classical antiquity—Aristotle above all. He includes heroes from Greco-Roman mythology as well as notables from Roman history. Dante’s Limbo underscores the regard medieval society held for the pre-Christian world created by Greece and Rome. This regard could even extend to “contemporary” pagans--Saladin, Avicenna, and Averroes (54-56).

Dante’s categorizing of sin in the *Inferno* is based upon a synthesis of Christian and Greco-

Roman values, and perhaps upon his own personal struggles with “sins of the heart.” Dante puts the incontinent in Upper Hell, because their sins are emotionally based—driven by passion or desire. They are the sins most easily committed, and harmful mainly to the self—not to others. Dante’s reaction to the she-wolf at the beginning of the poem suggests how vulnerable he feels in regard to these sins. [The she-wolf] “so weighed my spirits down with terror...that I lost hope of making the ascent” (29). In the second circle, designated for the adulterers, he is so enraptured by Francesca’s account of her fatal love affair that he swoons—overcome by his own emotions (40). Aristotelean ethics is founded on the principle of moderation (Aristotle 188-97). The loss of self-control, of concern for moderation, results in excess or extreme deprivation. Thus the adulterers, gluttons, “squanderers and horders,” and the “wrathful and sullen” find themselves in the appropriate circles of Upper Hell (Dante 26).

Dante’s Lower Hell begins with the sins of the Lion—violence and bestiality. These sins share with the sins of Upper Hell an element of irrationality and uncontrolled emotions, but they are more serious because they are outwardly directed and harm others. The heretics in the sixth circle threaten Christianity itself with their false religious doctrines. Those in the seventh circle are divided into those who inflict violence on neighbors or themselves, and those who act against God or pervert art and nature. It is important to note that unlike in Cicero and Virgil’s allegories that Dante’s poem does not honor so highly valor on the battlefield or fighting for one’s country. Many notable military leaders formerly praised for their leadership and martial skills now reside in Dante’s Hell. Found among the murderers and war-makes, they will forever be tormented by emersion in boiling blood. The sinners against themselves, those who have committed suicide, are encased in trees and eaten by harpies. These souls can only speak as their limbs bleed from the damage done by the harpies (90-95). Those sinners against God, nature, and art are tormented in “plain of burning sand” with a slow eternal “rain of fire” (111). The blasphemers are stretched along the sand, the perverts run in continuous circles, and the usurers “huddle on the sands” (151).

The final two circles of Hell are designated for the sins of the leopard, the sins malice and fraud. These sins require the perversion of Reason itself to achieve their ends, and for that they are the most serious of all. The eighth circle, called Malebolge, is home to the souls who committed simple fraud. These sinners are the seducers and panderers, flatterers, simoniacs, fortune tellers and diviners, grafters, hypocrites, thieves, evil counselors, sowers of discord, and the falsifiers (142-44). Each group is separated into ditches where they each experience torment fitting for their sin. The final and ninth circle is where those guilty of compound fraud reside. These are those who commit treachery against family, against country, against guests and hosts, and against lords and benefactors. These are the worst sinners. Here resides Satan himself, forever encased in a large block of ice. As he flaps his wings in an effort to escape, the ice entraps him more firmly (260-80). Dante's choice of treachery as the greatest sin underscores the importance of the relationships that bound together medieval society. His subcategories of treachery or betrayal also suggest that family was somewhat less important than other "socially-constructed" relationships.

Dante's *Divine Comedy* reveals that Greco-Roman values held strong even in a Christianized society a thousand years later. Christians of the High Middle Ages looked to the pagan past to formulate their values and their understanding of the world—in this life and next.

Just as Dante's allegory of an afterlife facilitates the ethical principles of Aristotle into Christianity and provides motivation against sinning, the promise of rewards or punishment in an afterlife serve as motivation for Plato, Cicero, and Virgil. For Plato, the reward or punishment in the afterlife completes his argument of justice. Cicero, likewise, promises a reward for those who display patriotism and public service. Virgil's afterlife serves as not only a means of propaganda, but also to bring light to the "mysteries" within this life, and perhaps ease the transition to the next. All of these visions of the afterlife convey the values and world view of that society.



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